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A Year After ICE Detained Him, Badar Khan Suri Still Believes in the American Promise

Khan Suri is continuing his research on religious pluralism as his case against the government becomes a touchpoint for the Trump administration's unprecedented immigration crackdown.

By Nora Toscano and Ajani Stella



Matthew Gassoso/The Hoya

Grappling with the persistent effects of his detainment, Khan Suri remains focused on researching democratic peacebuilding.

When Badar Khan Suri completed his Ph.D. in peace and conflict studies at Jamia Millia Islamia in India, he felt a responsibility to continue using academia to confront global violence.

Khan Suri said his wife, a U.S. citizen, suggested they relocate to the United States to continue their respective educations — her as a graduate student and him as a postdoctoral fellow.

"They say, and I also believed — I still believe — the United States is the best," Khan Suri told The Hoya. "Those universities were always best. It was always a dream."

Planning to study democratic peacebuilding, he joined Georgetown University's Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding (ACMCU) in January 2023. His wife and three children joined him later that year, and he began teaching his first course, an undergraduate seminar on majority-minority relations in South Asia, in Spring 2025.

Then, on the evening of March 17, 2025 — halfway through the semester and just over two years after he came to the United States — Khan Suri was detained by federal immigration agents.

He remained in custody for 58 days. Now, 11 months after returning to his family and Georgetown, Khan Suri says his detainment still weighs on him everyday.

He remains embroiled in a legal battle contesting both his ability to stay in the country and whether the government violated his First Amendment rights. His case has become a touchpoint for the Trump administration's immigration crackdown, which Georgetown community members say threatens their personal security and experts warn creates an unprecedented legal environment for foreign scholars.

Komal Samrow (SFS ’25), who was taking Khan Suri’s class when he was detained, said the news of Khan Suri’s detainment reframed her understanding of injustice, drawing on what she learned from the course about India’s deteriorating civil liberties.

“It made a lot of what we talked about in the course feel that much more real,” Samrow told The Hoya. “On the one hand, we’re talking about the safety of certain minorities and freedom of speech in South Asia and on the other hand, you have the very real threat that he might be deported to a country where, frankly, his freedom of speech will not be upheld and not be respected.”

Khan Suri said he refuses to let his fear control his life.

“I live in constant fear and at the same time I don’t care,” Khan Suri said. “Fear is real because I have certain hormones in me, and they react. I take control and then I keep doing the same. If anyone talks to me, I’m always here to talk to them, and if I go in a public gathering, I talk about courage.”

“If I go to jail again, I go to jail again — no problems — because freedom is not for free,” Khan Suri added. “One has to always fight for freedom and justice.”

In November, six months after his release, an immigration court again ruled that Khan Suri was deportable. His next hearing is slated for June 1, when an immigration judge will consider the government’s deportation case.

Though reunited with his family, Khan Suri said he still does not know what comes next.

“It’s a long struggle,” Khan Suri said. “When I returned home, I knew that I’m still in the desert, so I don’t know if I’m seeing an oasis or a mirage. It could be anything. If I’m in a sea, I’m drowning. My head is out, but still I’m in a big sea.”



Khan Suri spent 58 days in custody after immigration agents detained him outside his home on March 17, 2025. (Matthew Gassoso/The Hoya)

Fifty-Eight Days

Khan Suri spent a year alone in the United States before Mapheze Saleh (GRD ’27), his wife, joined him with their three children. They moved into a one-bedroom apartment in Rosslyn, Va., a 15-minute shuttle ride from Georgetown’s campus.

Adnan Rashid (GRD '24), one of Khan Suri's closest friends, said the two met while they were both living alone and often spent evenings talking in their offices.

"We love cricket, we care about minority rights, we're in the building right next to each other and then we just clicked," Rashid told The Hoya.

But after his detainment, Khan Suri changed, Rashid said. His hair grayed and he lost weight; Rashid said the pair still talked frequently, but their conversations were more serious.

"Our friendship before, it was mostly focusing on cracking jokes, looking at cricket, looking at the politics here in the United States and also back in India," Rashid said. "It was a view from a distance. Now, he's the primary source."

Khan Suri was nearing his apartment at about 9:20 p.m. on March 17, 2025, when immigration agents surrounded him. It was Ramadan, an Islamic holy month, and Khan Suri was returning from breaking his fast at Georgetown.

Khan Suri said the men jumped out of their cars and asked him if he was Badar.

"That was the most scary moment," Khan Suri said. "He was muscular and well-built and was wearing one same-color jumpsuit kind of thing, not a uniform or anything."

The government drew on a rarely used provision that allows the secretary of state to unilaterally deport someone by declaring them a threat to U.S. foreign policy interests. Khan Suri's legal team, however, argues that the government has twisted the statute's meaning to target individuals engaging in protected speech.

After detaining Khan Suri, the agents first took him to an office in Chantilly, Va., before transferring him to a detention center about three hours south. During the drive, Khan Suri asked the agents to turn off their loud music. Instead, they put on stereotypical Indian songs.

When they arrived at the facility, Khan Suri said he was locked in a room without a bed or meal. He asked to use the detention center's tablet to teach his class. The guards said no.

The next morning, Khan Suri was shackled by his wrists, abdomen and legs and flown to Louisiana before being bused to Texas. His final destination was overcrowded, he said, packed with dozens of men who shouted as a guard pushed him inside the cell.

"I took my foot back, and then the guy again pushed me in and locked that big, fat metallic door," Khan Suri said. "Then I lived there for two months, almost, and of those, around two weeks were on the floor until my lawyers asked them to give me a bed."

In Rosslyn, Saleh said she felt frozen.

"That night, I couldn't sleep at all," Saleh wrote to The Hoya. "I kept replaying the scene in my mind. I felt overwhelmed, frightened and very alone."

For the first month of his detainment, Khan Suri did not receive any visitors. In late April, ACMCU Director Nader Hashemi said he visited the Texas center, where Khan Suri was classified as a high-security inmate with limited privileges.

"I was hoping that I'd go and I'd sit in some sort of room across the table," Hashemi told The Hoya. "Of course, none of that was an option because of his status, so I had to talk to him through one of these phones behind a window, like you see in the movies."

On May 14, a federal judge released Khan Suri, saying the government violated his First Amendment rights in their justification for detaining him. Almost immediately, the federal government appealed the decision. An appellate court heard arguments in March.

When he was first freed, Khan Suri said he was constantly afraid of being redetained.

"May, June, July, I was locked in my apartment, always looking through the windows that someone would again come and do the same thing," Khan Suri said. "Once they did it and it was all fake, all lies, so again, what would stop them from doing it?"

“Once, walking with my wife, I saw a police officer stopping me,” Khan Suri added. “My heart stopped beating. Then, he stopped me because he was helping a car to move.”

Khan Suri said he still doesn’t know whether he has found permanent stability or is living in a temporary respite.

“Every time I would hear any knocking sound, I said, ‘Someone is there to pick me up again,’” Khan Suri said. “Even sometimes now, I think like that. Even now, when I open my apartment door, I imagine that a police officer in that blackish uniform or something is standing there.”

‘With Its Own Baggage’

Thirteen months after Khan Suri was detained, he and his family say their world — including their friendships and academic programs — feels fundamentally different.

During Khan Suri’s detainment, Saleh said their 5-year-old twins were worried about their father.

“I told them their father was traveling,” Saleh wrote. “Even so, they sensed that something was wrong. They would stand by the window, watching airplanes, asking if their father was on one of them or wondering if he was ‘lost in the sky.’”

Their 9-year-old son, meanwhile, withdrew from social interactions after overhearing a conversation with lawyers.

Now, Saleh said the family must balance daily routines with their persistent trauma.

“Life now is more stable with Badar back home, although there is still uncertainty because of the ongoing case,” Saleh wrote. “We are trying to rebuild a sense of normalcy and move forward, even while carrying what we went through.”

Yassine Florez (GRD ’26), who supported the family during detainment and is now a close friend, said Khan Suri, Saleh and their children appear closer than ever.

“After what they went through, it makes sense that it would be even more of a close-knit family,” Florez told The Hoya. “They’re always doing activities together. They’re always hosting potlucks, inviting us over, inviting others over. They’re always appreciating each others’ time even more than before.”

Still, Khan Suri said his relationships with friends and family have shifted.

“It is with its own baggage,” Khan Suri said. “I mean, we have to talk all the time about these things, sufferings and wrongs done by the government, and when will it end.”

Khan Suri said his detainment has instilled fear throughout his community, particularly at Georgetown.

“Everybody is fearful. Everyone is scared,” Khan Suri said. “The whole idea, or the whole purpose of doing what they did to us was to chill the dissent.”

When news of Khan Suri’s detainment reached Georgetown last March, community members said they felt the government had infringed on the university’s autonomy. The campus erupted in a series of protests and campaigns demanding his freedom.

Samrow said she and other students both appreciated the greater significance of their professor’s detainment and felt a personal loss.

“To everybody, he was this big headline, and he was one name of a slew of names representing the human rights abuses of the current administration and all the wrong, horrible things that were happening,” Samrow said. “And that’s all true, and that remains true, but to us, to his students and to the people in his life, he was our professor.”

Meanwhile, Khan Suri’s colleagues say his case became a microcosm of the federal government’s broader attacks against Middle East studies and the ACMCU.

Hashemi said mounting federal pressure has disrupted his academic work and forced him to focus on administrative efforts to protect his staff.



For Khan Suri's colleagues, his case is a prominent example of the federal government's broader attacks on Middle East studies. (Matthew Gassoso/The Hoya)

"It was very much, personally, a moment where I had to sometimes pinch myself and ask, 'Am I dreaming here? Is this a nightmare?'" Hashemi said. "But it wasn't a nightmare. It's my lived reality."

"I have to spend so much time of unpaid labor as a director responding to those bogus accusations that take me away from my own research agenda," Hashemi added.

Joel Hellman — dean of Georgetown's School of Foreign Service (SFS), which houses the ACMCU — said administrators worried that Khan Suri's detainment would chill campus expression, particularly for international students who could face retaliation.

"We were deeply disturbed by what happened — to see a member of our community being snatched from his home in the evening with very little information to his family or to his employer," Hellman told The Hoya.

"We were very concerned about how this would ripple across the campus in terms of all students, but especially, of course, our international students and those who might be vulnerable because of their visa status," Hellman added.

Georgetown at large has also grappled with a U.S. political environment that has become increasingly hostile to immigration. In April 2025, the government terminated the immigration statuses of at least 10 Georgetown community members, and in June, the university recommended that some international students defer admission due to a White House travel ban on certain countries.

Khan Suri said when he returned to campus, he saw himself as a conduit for the federal government to punish these wider institutions and ideologies, including Arab studies, Georgetown and the ACMCU.

"I was found — someone who was just on a visa," Khan Suri said. "So to target all these three institutions, I was targeted."

Hellman said the SFS has never experienced this level of pressure on international students, forcing university leaders to offer greater administrative support.

“Five years ago, it was unimaginable to think that we would be in a situation where there are so many imposed constraints or factors that are heavily weighing on the desirability of coming to the United States to study,” Hellman said. “We’re in a very, very, very different environment.”

‘This Is Worth Fighting’

As the Georgetown community grapples with a changed academic environment, legal scholars say Khan Suri’s case could reshape how courts apply the First Amendment to noncitizens. The government is contesting whether noncitizens can petition the federal judiciary, rather than solely immigration courts, over constitutional violations.

Khan Suri is currently a party in two parallel cases: one in federal court and one in immigration court. The federal case focuses on Khan Suri’s constitutional challenges to his detention. His immigration case centers on whether the government can remove him from the country.

When detaining Khan Suri, the federal government publicly cited his familial ties. Khan Suri’s father-in-law is a former Hamas official who left the militant group more than a decade ago and publicly criticized Hamas’ Oct. 7, 2023, attack on Israel. Saleh said in legal filings that Khan Suri only met her father twice.

In internal memos, the government cited two main sources as justification for detainment: his academic activity and posts from conservative watchdog groups criticizing his connection to his father-in-law. A March 2025 analysis by The Hoya of Khan Suri’s social media found that he opposed Israel’s military action in Gaza and did not advocate violent or illegal activity.

Dan Berger, a leading immigration attorney, said the government’s effort to deport Khan Suri has thrust into the spotlight, for the first time, a conflict between how courts understand First Amendment protections and immigration enforcement.

“It’s just unclear because there are no real guidelines,” Berger told The Hoya. “If speech can have immigration consequences, then what kind of speech is okay and what isn’t?”

Khan Suri’s case is just one example of how the Trump administration has transformed Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s (ICE) application of immigration law, said Megan Kludt (SFS ’02), a litigator and former immigration appellate judge.

“Previously, ICE officers did not target students and professors just for commentary they were making,” Kludt told The Hoya. “So previously, we never had to tell people to worry about things like that.”

“Having to ask clients about their social media presence, about what they’re saying online, is something we never had to do before,” Kludt added.

Johnny Sinodis — a partner at Van Der Hout LLP, the law firm representing Khan Suri in his immigration case — said the current legal environment is especially concerning for immigrants because the executive branch, rather than the federal judiciary, oversees immigration courts.

In early 2025, the Department of Justice fired immigration judges, such as Kludt, who were largely appointed by Democratic presidents and have since purged dozens of judges who ruled against deportation orders. The immigration appellate court has overwhelmingly and unprecedentedly sided with the federal government during Trump’s second term, according to an NPR analysis.

Hassan Ahmad, Khan Suri’s original immigration lawyer, said Trump’s reshaping of the immigration system feels more methodical in his second term than it did in his first.

“It felt like a sledgehammer last time,” Ahmad told The Hoya. “They were just trying to break everything down, all the good parts. This time, they brought not only a sledgehammer but a scalpel because they knew exactly where to make the cuts in addition to knocking things down.”

“I’m tired,” Ahmad added. “We all are.”

Khan Suri said his struggle has reinvigorated his interest in advancing peacebuilding and democracy.



Khan Suri is currently a party in two parallel cases: a federal case weighing the constitutionality of his detention, and an immigration case considering the government's ability to deport him. (Matthew Gassoso/The Hoya)

"Whatever we were fearing — that authoritarianism can make Orwellian dystopia a reality — every American is going through that reality now that this transition to authoritarianism is not bookish," Khan Suri said. "It is real. We all faced it. I personally faced it. It, in a way, made me from an armchair researcher to becoming a case study."

"No society should break like this," he added.

Sophia Gregg, one of the lawyers representing Khan Suri from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Virginia, said the government's treatment of Khan Suri and other foreign scholars may predict how it treats U.S. citizens in the future.

"There are important issues that everyone should be thinking about, because when it comes to the rights that this country gives or revokes from non-citizens, ultimately, it is the canary in the coal mine for others," Gregg told The Hoya.

Despite the seemingly endless circles of legal proceedings, Khan Suri said he remains committed to his court battle.

"These are unprecedented times, and this is worth fighting, because it will set a precedent," Khan Suri said. "If we are able to win, maybe others will not go through this. But if we lose, then it becomes an easy way for the government to repeat and defeat people like this."

As Khan Suri awaits his June 1 immigration hearing, the court is considering a motion by his lawyers for discovery, which would allow them to subpoena government records. It remains unclear what that trial will look like or if it will be delayed.

In the meantime, he is working on his first book, compiling his research on religious pluralism, majoritarianism and intolerance in South Asia.

No matter the mental and emotional toll of the past 13 months, Khan Suri said he refuses to see himself as a victim.

"These challenges we are facing are not the only challenges ever faced by mankind," Khan Suri said. "There were challenges before. There will be challenges after. Freedom and justice are to be fought for all the time by all the generations."